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[Village Life]

When the second world war came, followed by Italian and German occupation and drastic derangement of the national economy, the situation of the hill villages became truly desperate. Starvation visited many of them.

Famine in time of war was age-old; and the response of the hillsmen of Greece also had very ancient precedent behind it, for they took gun in hand, and attempted to seize forcibly what they could no longer gain peaceably from the plains. They formed the backbone of the wartime resistance forces, and justified their violence by patriotism, quite in the spirit their forefathers had shown in attacking the Turks. Yet the resistance movement was not merely a reassertion of old patterns. Its leadership was mainly provided by Communists, who in earlier years had been a small and not very significant group, largely confined to the towns. [1]

In the wartime resistance movement the inhabitants of the hill villages found a sort of economic relief, inasmuch as the guerrilla bands lived by raiding the plains, taking by force a part of the agricultural surplus of those regions in order to feed themselves. A young man, without any real occupation in his native village, and without any hope of a career at home which could satisfy even the traditionally low level of expectation among the hillsmen, could, by joining a guerrilla band, hope to feed himself and relieve his family of the burden of his presence. In addition, he could become a hero, fighting for freedom and liberty, social justice and a better life for all.

For most peasant boys, the ulterior aims of their Communist leaders meant little or nothing. Indeed, the Communists were at very considerable pains to play down any plans they had for social revolution, and welcomed persons of widely differing social views into the ranks of the resistance. This was, of course,

1. There were a number of non-Communist resistance bands also, but most of them did not last long, and the successful ones were confined to Epirus, in the northwest.

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households owning 100 stremmata each did not find it necessary to work the land themselves. Like the absentee in Volos, they also rented their fields on a sharecropping basis to the others. The president of the village in 1956 was the head of one of these households; he had let the nail of his little finger on one hand grow in order to prove to everyone that he was exempt from manual labor. He was also the only fat man I saw in the village.

The bad feeling in Cherasia was not simply a matter of economics, however. Shepherds have had a proud tradition in Greece. Heavy manual labor is beneath them, and they have always felt themselves superior to the grubbing farmers of the plains. Moreover, a tradition of violence has always lain near the surface among shepherds. In days not so very far past, it was part of the shepherd's job to protect his flock from wolves. Even today a few wolves are said to survive in remote parts of Greece; and whenever public order breaks down, far more dangerous two-footed wolves, armed with guns, quickly appear. The transition from shepherd to bandit has always been easy. A shepherd losing his flock must almost automatically become a two-footed wolf himself, preying on other shepherds or, better yet, on the fat, stolid landlords and peasants of the plain.

In view of these traditions, one can better understand the spirit of Cherasia. Free shepherds, traditionally ready for violence, were being ground down to a status beneath that of the weaklings who in 1905 had preferred the indignity of labor to the leisure of mountain pastures; and to the people of Cherasia this seemed a clear reversal of the proper social order. They were most unwilling to accept such a reversal. They were not farmers, and did not wish to become farmers. As a result, they did not do all they might have done to make their hillside agriculture rewarding. Field labor was, for them, a regrettable necessity, not a satisfying way of life. They made no effort at

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178 terracing, attempted no planting of fruit trees or of vines, and in general refused to borrow any of the traditional and very effective methods of Greek Mediterranean agriculture, even though there are villages on the other side of Mount Pelion, within less than two hours' walking distance, where these methods have been in use for centuries on land intrinsically no better than that of the Cherasia hillsides. (There is one important difference, however: because Cherasia's land faces north, toward the open Thessalian plain, cold winter winds blow across it and make olive cultivation impossible. But olive cultivation is and has always been the backbone of Mediterranean hillside agriculture. This undoubtedly is the reason why settlers from over the mountain never tried to exploit Cherasia's hillsides, leaving them to shepherds for winter pasture.)

178 The upshot of the history and traditions of Cherasia was that even before World War II, a thoroughly revolutionary mood prevailed in the village. The poor – which is to say nearly everybody in the village except the three families – felt the need to find a scapegoat for what was happening to them. They despised but also envied the three "rich" families, and felt that it would no more than serve them right to be plundered of all they had gained. The villagers also held the government and all other persons in authority vaguely responsible for the straits in which they found themselves. They could not help casting greedy eyes upon rich villages like Lofiscos, which lies within sight of Cherasia, a scant twenty miles across the flat Thessalian plain. But unlike most Greek villagers, they did not really want agricultural land; plunder was more in line with the tradition of the community.

The Communist-led guerrilla movement of World War II therefore found unusually ready and unanimous support in Cherasia. No one was willing to tell me how many men from

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the village joined the resistance during the occupation period; but my guess is that practically every able-bodied man took part at some time or other in guerrilla actions, even though some of the villagers remained ostensibly civilian. A consequence was that in 1943 a German expedition burnt all the houses of the upper village and made it uninhabitable. The people of Cherasia, fortunately, saw them coming and had time to escape over the mountain.

The "liberation" of Greece in 1944 brought no liberation to Cherasia. Quite the contrary, it interfered with the process by which armed men from the village had been able during the occupation to get grain and other goods from the plains. Consequently, when three men appeared on Mount Pelion in 1946 and summoned the young men of the village to take arms again, the response was immediate. When I visited the village in 1947, a guerrilla band, some thirty strong, was encamped in the ruins of the upper village. A detachment descended each evening to gather supplies from the inhabitants of the lower village and from other villages out in the plain. Most of the members of the band were sons of families living in lower Cherasia, although the leaders of the band came from elsewhere.

During the day, the Greek army, from a strong point in a neighboring plains village, took possession of Cherasia. Each morning a patrol of soldiers came to the village and demanded to know who had been collaborating with the guerrillas; each evening the guerrillas came down from the mountain and demanded to know who had been helping the soldiers. Under the circumstances, life was difficult, to say the least. The army sometimes beat those suspected of sympathizing with the guerrillas. In addition, irregular rightist bands visited the community several times and indulged in greater violence, killing several people and burning down seven houses. The guerrillas,